

FIRE PROBLEMS ALONG FLORIDA'S URBAN/WILDLAND INTERFACE^{1/}

by

Dale D. Wade and Michael C. Long^{2/}

Florida has long served as a retirement mecca for the eastern U.S. During the past decade, immigration has averaged more than 1,000 people a day! No wonder Florida continues to lead the nation in population growth. Vast sections of wildland, some covering hundreds of square miles, have been subdivided, roaded and marketed worldwide. The natural ecosystem has been severely taxed. Water use rates commonly exceed recharge rates.

A major factor that draws people to Florida is the climate. The state is blessed with abundant rain, long sunny days, and warm temperatures that combine to produce a lush vegetative complex. A complex that becomes exceedingly flammable during the frequent droughts, particularly when dry periods are preceeded by a killing frost. Even the organic soils that underlie normally wetter areas often become dry enough to ignite. Fire, frost and water will undoubtedly continue to shape this vegetative mosaic. Even though humans have become the major cause of wildfires, Florida averages more lightning fires than the combined total of all other states east of the Mississippi.

Superimposing a soaring population growth rate upon this fire-prone environment has exacerbated an already tenuous situation. The lack of fuel-reduction measures around homesites is an invitation to disaster that's all-too-often accommodated. Fires in the exotic species melaleuca are especially troublesome because they often actively involve the tree crowns. Due to the large number of retirees, a rather high proportion of the population suffers from respiratory difficulties, most of which are aggravated by smoke. Organic soil smoke is particularly acrid, sometimes necessitating evacuation of nearby homes for extended periods while these smoldering, yet difficult-to-extinguish fires are fought. The results of smoke-caused reductions in visibility continue to make the news but are often forgotten or simply ignored by motorists, resulting in yet another front page story.

Five thousand fires have blackened 340,000 acres, the largest slightly over 60,000 acres during the first 6 months of 1989. Numerous homes in Northport, an extensive subdivision on the gulf coast near Port Charlotte have been destroyed, as well as others scattered throughout the state. Until city administrators, planning and zoning boards, and the residents themselves decide to implement existing knowledge, fire suppression forces will continue to be frustrated in their attempts to protect life and property.

^{1/} Interactive presentation at the International Wildfire Conference "Meeting Global Wildland Fire Challenges - The People, The Land, The Resources" held July 23-26, 1989 in Boston, MA.

^{2/} Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Division of Forestry, State of Florida, USA respectively.